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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: ANNOUNCEMENT TO FUND OPPOSITION HARSHLY CRITICIZED BY ANTI-REGIME ELEMENTS, OTHERS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Post contacts have been quick to condemn the USG's public statement announcing the designation of five million USD for support of the Syrian opposition, calling it "nave" and "harmful." Contacts insist that the statement has already hurt the opposition, and that the SARG will use it in the coming months to further discredit its opponents as agents of the Americans. We have also heard repeatedly that no bona fide opposition member will be courageous enough to accept funding. Contacts noted that the announcement could benefit the SARG, since NGO's with ties (often covert) to the SARG or its security services could be encouraged to apply for the funds. Several contacts insisted that the initiative indicated the U.S. did not really care about the opposition, but merely wanted to use it as "a chip in the game." One contact praised the funding but said the amount was paltry compared with what had been set aside for the Iranian opposition. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Embassy contacts expressed frustration with the USG's February 17 public statement announcing the designation of five million USD for support of the Syrian opposition. Contacts agreed that the very public way in which the initiative was launched would hurt the opposition. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that such funding initiatives are good but should be kept secret. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the opposition is poor and mechanisms should be created to fund their endeavors; however, "we must be very careful" and harmful to the opposition's efforts. XXXXXXXXXXXX cited the example of Rafiq Hariri's initial philanthropic work in Lebanon in the early 1990s as an intelligent, strategic means of opening the door for more political activism: "You have to find the right channel to help people."

¶3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX related that at a February 18 meeting of about twenty Damascus Declaration participants, those assembled had decided to publicly denounce the MEPI project because they felt they had to, in order to avoid even more SARG scrutiny. XXXXXXXXXXXX, said that the general consensus among XXXXXXXXXXXX civil society and opposition colleagues had been that the USG is "not serious

¶4. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX claimed that the announcement made it far too risky now for anyone with any credibility or a reputation to protect to accept funding. In XXXXXXXXXXXX view, it is much more difficult now for the U.S. to help strengthen the opposition than it was before the announcement. According to XXXXXXXXXXXX, either the USG is nave or it doesn't care "and either conclusion is bad." When asked if XXXXXXXXXXXX thought that anyone would apply for funds, legal situation that makes it very easy for the SARG to construe the acceptance of such funds as "treason, punishable by death."

¶5. (C) WILL SARG HIJACK USG FUNDING? Contacts were also quick to point out that the announcement could benefit the SARG. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the SARG will be able to use the MEPI funding story as a propaganda tool against the opposition. XXXXXXXXXXXX was concerned that the SARG would attempt to hijack USG funding by encouraging NGOs with strong government or security ties to apply for MEPI funds, thus "draining" funds from more worthy and independent NGOs.

¶6. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX described the funding plan as a terrible idea that will be used by the regime to discredit the opposition. In XXXXXXXXXXXX view, the announcement had already severely damaged the opposition, making all of them look, in the eyes of most Syrians, like a

¶7. (C) Warming to XXXXXXXXXXXX subject, XXXXXXXXXXXX called the funding plan "poorly thought out," one that will weaken the opposition in Syria regime. Echoing others, XXXXXXXXXXXX made the point that the U.S. needed to be much more secretive, or at least discreet, if it wanted to fund the opposition and civil society in an effective way. In XXXXXXXXX

¶8. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX, dismissed the funding plan as a stunt, saying the amount of money was small and that the U.S. had already been funding the opposition secretly, without impact. The new initiative would make

¶9. (C) One embassy contact, XXXXXXXXXXXX, offered qualified praise for the initiative, saying that XXXXXXXXXXXX was happy about the funding, but critical of the public way that it was offered. XXXXXXXXXXXX also noted that the USG's pledge of \$75 million to the Iranian opposition largely overshadowed the \$5 million for Syrian efforts a SECHE